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Chairman: Mr. Sharma ..... (Nepal)
Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions: Mr. Mselle

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Organization of work

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The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.

Agenda item 116: Pattern of Conferences (*continued*) (A/56/901; A/57/32 and Corr.1, A/57/228 and A/57/228/Add.1 and A/57/228/Add.2, A/57/289, and A/57/472)

1. **Mr. Pulido León** (Venezuela), speaking on behalf of the Group of 77 and China, welcomed the efforts made in increasing utilization of the conference centre in Bangkok and urged that further efforts should be made to promote enhanced coordination of conference planning, with a view to avoiding waste. It was encouraging to note that, as a result of the establishment of a permanent interpretation service at the United Nations Office at Nairobi (UNON), the number of events there had increased by 10 per cent, and the number of meetings covered by interpretation had risen by 23.5 per cent during 2001. To account for that increase in activity, the General Assembly had requested the modernization of facilities at UNON to alleviate the shortage of meeting space. The Group would welcome information concerning the status of implementation of that request. Similarly, it would like to know why the vacant posts for interpreters at UNON had yet to be filled.

2. Concerning the chronic problem of late issuance of documentation, he called for strict compliance with the six-week rule. It was imperative that the authors of reports should respect the 10-week rule for the submission of documents, and that the Department of General Assembly and Conference Management should redouble its efforts to improve coordination with author departments, with a view to resolving the problems that led to late issuance. Any reduction in the length of reports must not be allowed to impair either the quality of presentation or the content of reports, and must be entirely consistent. The Group attached considerable importance to preserving the institutional memory of the Organization, which included the provision of rapid, easy access to documents in the six official languages of the United Nations. Summary records and verbatim reports were an essential part of that process. He asked for details of the plan to transfer some editors to the translation services, and would like to know whether that would affect the quality of translations.

3. His Group concurred with the view expressed by the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (ACABQ) (A/57/472, para. 6), that it was inadvisable to impose a strict rule on compliance with the calendar of conferences and meetings approved by the General Assembly. A more pragmatic approach should be followed to facilitate the successful conclusion of conferences. He endorsed the view expressed by the Secretary-General (A/57/228, para. 34) that, in order to provide interpretation services for meetings of regional groupings of Member States on a more predictable basis, the corresponding expenses should be included in the programme budget for the biennium 2004-2005. He requested clarification as to how the substantive and technical capacity of the secretariats of the Fifth and Sixth Committees would be retained if, as proposed, responsibility for them were transferred to the Department of General Assembly and Conference Management.

4. **Mr. Iossifov** (Russian Federation) said that his delegation was ready to adopt the draft revised calendar of conferences and meetings for 2003 (A/57/228/Add.1 and 2). He noted with satisfaction that, in drafting the revised calendar, the Secretariat had taken into account the arrangements referred to in General Assembly resolution 56/242 concerning Orthodox Good Friday.

5. It was vital to make optimum and effective use of the Organization's conference resources. In that connection, his delegation supported the positive coordinating and consultative role of the Committee on Conferences and the efforts of the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management. It would continue to pay close attention to interpretation and translation in the United Nations with a view to ensuring that there was full compliance with the rules on the use of the Organization's official and working languages and that Member States enjoyed equal treatment in terms of the quality and quantity of the services provided.

6. The chronic problem of the late issuance of documentation must be addressed. In that connection, his delegation supported the establishment of an effective system of responsibility and accountability within the Secretariat so as to ensure that documents were submitted for processing in a timely fashion. He noted that delays in issuing documents had a direct impact on the efficiency of the work of deliberative bodies.

7. His delegation welcomed the report of the Secretary-General on improving the performance of the

Department for General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services (A/57/289), which provided a critical and constructive analysis of the Department's shortcomings. Concerning the specific proposals made in the report, he emphasized that the solution to the problem of the late issuance of documentation did not lie in the abolition of the six-week rule. His delegation would appreciate an effort on the part of the Secretariat, when difficulties arose, to issue reports within at least four weeks of the opening of sessions. It would then be prepared to consider, based on the outcome, the formal revision of the aforementioned rule. His delegation had no objection to the conduct of a study of the possibility of replacing summary records with digital recordings, provided that no additional resources were required, and it welcomed the plans set out in the report for the use of modern technologies.

8. He expressed support for the proposed strengthening of the role of the Committee on Conferences in assessing the possibility of providing additional conference services. In that connection, there was a need to ensure that the Committee was provided with all the necessary information, including information on unused or redistributed conference resources.

9. His delegation considered it important to maintain the existing division of authority and functions between the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management in New York and the United Nations Offices at Vienna, Geneva and Nairobi and supported the recommendation of ACABQ in that regard. It was not convinced of the need for further centralization of authority, particularly in the light of the Secretary-General's statement, in his report on accountability and responsibility (A/55/270), that the series of reforms begun in 1997 had been based on the premise that giving managers more authority and responsibility for decision-making was essential to the improvement of the management of human and financial resources.

10. Lastly, his delegation attached great importance to the provision of efficient and high-quality conference services in the United Nations and was ready to work constructively with other delegations to that end.

11. **Ms. Udo** (Nigeria) said that conference services were crucial for the smooth functioning of the intergovernmental process and the execution of mandates by the expert bodies of the United Nations. In that connection, she welcomed the increase in the percentage of meetings held by regional and other major groupings that had been provided with interpretation services during the period under review. She noted with satisfaction that, as a result of the establishment of a permanent interpretation service at the United Nations Office at Nairobi (UNON), the number of meetings at which interpretation services had been provided had increased by 23.5 per cent in 2001 and the number of events held by 10 per cent; the efforts made during the previous year to improve the utilization of conference services at UNON had paid dividends. Those dividends would have been greater but for the constraints inherent in the existing facilities, which posed a serious challenge for any further increase in utilization. The facilities at the Office should be placed on the same level as those of other United Nations administrative offices worldwide, and the Committee should be informed of the status of the relevant report. The remaining vacancies in the Interpretation Section at UNON should be filled.

12. Her delegation had noted that the budgetary implications of the integration of the technical servicing secretariats of the Fifth and Sixth Committees within the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management would be reported in the context of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2004-2005. Lastly, it trusted that the proposed new arrangements for the distribution of documents would be implemented with due regard for the intergovernmental process.

13. **Ms. Afifi** (Morocco) said that her delegation associated itself with the comments made by the representative of Venezuela on behalf of the Group of 77 and China. The Committee on Conferences had reached some valid and interesting conclusions. She shared its concern, expressed in paragraphs 34 and 35 of its report (A/57/32), regarding the drop in the overall utilization factor at the four duty stations, and supported its recommendations for achieving optimum utilization of conference-servicing resources. The increased use of interpretation by regional and other groupings of Member States was an encouraging development, given the importance of those groupings to the work of the United Nations. There had also been a welcome growth in conference activity in Bangkok and Nairobi. However, it was regrettable that four posts for Arabic interpreters had yet to be filled in Nairobi.

Given the strategic importance of UNON for Africa and all the South countries, she asked whether a more focused recruitment drive had been considered to strengthen that particular duty station. By the same token, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) should be required to comply with the Headquarters rule and conduct of all of their meetings at UNON.

14. The fresh approach to conference servicing proposed in the report of the Secretary-General on improving the performance of the Department of General Assembly and Conference Management (A/57/289) would make a useful contribution to enhancing its efficiency. She supported efforts to give the Department a more proactive role, and welcomed any improvement in the situation concerning the late issuance of documents. Lastly, her delegation supported any proposal for enhancing the use of new technologies, provided that the difficulties of developing countries in gaining access to such technologies were fully taken into account.

15. **Mr. Naidu** (Fiji), speaking on behalf of the Pacific Island Forum countries, paid tribute to the skill and commitment of the staff working in the area of conference management, and supported the new proposals for the Department. He emphasized the principles of participation and partnership in relation to conference services. Owing to the volume and late submission of documents, the difficulty faced by Member States in absorbing and acting adequately on reports was particularly acute for small delegations like those of the Pacific Island Forum countries. He therefore fully supported the efforts of the Secretary-General to streamline the number, length and timeliness of documents. The increased use of joint debates might reduce the volume of documents and save conference time Member States were, however, also partners in ensuring the smooth functioning of conferences and they could facilitate matters by requesting fewer documents. Such changes would allow small delegations to participate more meaningfully in the work of the Organization.

16. The meetings statistics provided in the report on the pattern of conferences were a stark reminder of the responsibility of Member States for the wastage of the Organization's resources; almost 120 hours had been lost during the fifty-sixth session of the General Assembly owing to the late start of meetings. The data should be brought to the attention of other committees, with a view to fostering a more conscious appreciation of the impact of meeting management. He welcomed the proposals for closer coordination in future between the Department and the secretaries and chairmen of committees, in order to develop a shared sense of responsibility for the functioning of the Organization.

17. **Ms. Wang** Xinxia (China) said that her delegation wished to associate itself with the statement made by the representative of Venezuela on behalf of the Group of 77 and China. Noting the decline in the overall utilization rate of conference services in 2001, she expressed the hope that the offices concerned would strengthen the planning process and make timely adjustments to their work programmes so as to reduce wastage. The new proactive approach adopted by the Department of General Assembly and Conference Management and the increased focus on the planning, coordination and management of conference services and documentation would give the Department more control and ensure greater accuracy and predictability in the planning of meetings, result in more efficient use of resources and enhance the quality of meetings and document services. Her delegation would support the establishment of a coordinating body composed of the secretariats of the six Main Committees of the General Assembly to plan and organize meetings jointly.

18. If the proposed slotting system was able to ensure the timely distribution of high-quality documents to Member States it could be a very practical and effective measure. In that connection, she noted that delegations still had to struggle with lengthy reports from some departments, and she urged the Secretariat and, in particular, the author entities to comply with the existing page limits rule.

19. The quality of translation and interpretation was a matter of concern to Member States. Performance measures should reflect not only individual workload standards, but also the quality of the work accomplished, the translator's or interpreter's attitude to his or her work and the incidence of errors. The language services should hold regular dialogues with delegations in order to gauge user satisfaction. There was also a need for an effective and comprehensive monitoring system for translators and interpreters, as well as training programmes for underperformers.

20. **Mr. Pelšs** (Latvia) said that his delegation wished to associate itself with the statement made by the

the representative of Denmark on behalf of the European Union. Regarding the utilization of conference services, he expressed concern that the equivalent of more than 300 meetings had been wasted in 2001 owing to late starts and early endings of meetings. In the same period, the overall utilization factor had dropped six points below the benchmark of 80 per cent. His delegation shared the view expressed in paragraph 37 of the report of the Committee on Conferences (A/57/32) that better planning and flexible adjustment of the programme of work were the best way to reduce wastage. He expressed support for the efforts of the Chairman of the Committee on Conferences to address the problem of bodies that were consistent underutilizers of conference services. Other bodies, however, were consistently unable to stay within their allocated meeting time owing to their extensive mandates. His delegation therefore advocated a holistic approach, involving not only consistent underutilizers, but also consistent overutilizers.

21. His delegation strongly supported the Secretary-General's goal of reducing the number of United Nations meetings. The number of resolutions and reports should also be reduced, but that was primarily a responsibility of Member States. His delegation regarded the guidelines on limiting meeting duration, contained in the annex to General Assembly resolution 56/242, as a useful set of tools for the Secretariat. The reduction of meeting time should not, however, undermine the ability of bodies to fulfil their mandates. In implementing any streamlining process, it was imperative to bear in mind the vision of the Charter and the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

22. **Mr. Sabbagh** (Syrian Arab Republic) said that his delegation fully supported the statement made by the representative of Venezuela on behalf of the Group of 77 and China.

23. The Fifth Committee was meeting under exceptional circumstances. In the first place, its work had been paralysed for an entire week, thus creating a serious precedent which should not be repeated. His delegation looked to the departments concerned, including the Department of General Assembly and Conference Management, for an explanation. In the second place, the Committee was dealing with reports on the strengthening of the United Nations and the improvement of the performance of the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services.

24. The report of the Secretary-General on the latter subject (A/56/289) lacked clarity and precision. It put forward new ideas and new concepts without explaining their purpose. Moreover, the conclusions were not consistent with the introductory remarks. His delegation would be prepared to explain those criticisms in more detail during the informal consultations or, if necessary, during the current meeting. It was by no means clear how the proposal to do away with summary records would improve the performance of the Department; he pointed out that the proposed digital sound recordings were not a valid alternative to summary records. In any case, sound recordings of meetings were already one of the facilities that should be provided in accordance with rule 58 (b) of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly. Concerning the importance of printed documentation, he said that it was one of the major functions of the Department to assist delegations, in particular through the provision of printed material in the six official languages, to have access to the institutional memory of the Organization. Account should also be taken, in the process of consultation with delegations, of their differing capacity to benefit from the digital revolution. The provision of documents and publications was not only a matter for delegations but was also of concern to the Member States as a whole and, in particular, to research institutes and universities. It would be paradoxical to discuss new methods of distributing documents at a time when the United Nations was clearly failing to ensure equal treatment between the languages on its web site and in the optical disk system. It was clear, therefore, that the United Nations was failing to provide for equal treatment of the official languages of the Organization as required by General Assembly resolution 42/207 C. The proposed structural change in the Department therefore needed to be more fully explained and its objectives better defined.

25. His delegation had noted that a number of the reports requested in General Assembly resolution 56/242 had not been submitted and that no action had been taken on a number of legislative mandates in the same resolution. Moreover, there had been delays in the issuance of summary records, verbatim records, and General Assembly resolutions, and there had been further instances of documents being published on the internet before they were translated and before they were available to delegations in hard copy. There were also many other related shortcomings which his

delegation would address during the informal consultations.

26. The programme budget for the biennium 2002-2003 should be published in full with all the amendments adopted by the General Assembly. The failure of the Department to do that was a violation of the relevant provisions of resolution 54/249. His delegation also wished to receive information on the status of translation of the *Repertoire of the Practice of the Security Council* into the six official languages and to learn the reasons for the issuance of increasing numbers of documents that had not been translated into the six official languages, in violation of the provisions of resolution 56/242.

27. With reference to the report of the Committee on Conferences (A/57/32 and Corr.1) his delegation welcomed the measures taken concerning Id al-Fitr and Id al-Adha and Orthodox Good Friday and also the improvement that had been achieved in the United Nations Office at Nairobi and at the United Nations Centre in Bangkok and asked what steps had been taken to fill posts in the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) and language posts, particularly the Arabic language posts, in Nairobi. Although his delegation was pleased to note the intention of the Secretariat to improve the issuance of ESCWA documents up to the year 2005, it felt that the problem was an urgent one and ought to be dealt with more expeditiously. His delegation wished to emphasize the importance of paragraph 21 of General Assembly resolution 48/222 A, which requested the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions, in deciding on its meeting schedule, including meetings away from Headquarters, to take into account the programme of work of the Fifth Committee. He expressed the hope that that measure would lead to an improvement in the timely issuance of ACABQ documents, which had become an urgent problem and he emphasized the importance of having the Advisory Committee's reports translated into all six official languages.

28. His delegation also felt that paragraph 18 of the same resolution, which emphasized, in particular, that the primary goal of the introduction of new technology should be to enhance the quality of conference services and ensure their timely provision, would be particularly borne in mind in the context of the Committee's consideration of new technologies.

29. With respect to interpretation, his delegation was concerned about the statements in paragraphs 101 and 102 of the Secretary-General's report on the pattern of conferences (A/57/228), which stated that remote interpretation was not currently considered a priority in international organizations, and that the European Parliament had adopted a recommendation in 2002 advocating the introduction of remote interpretation but that the question as to whether, how and when the European Parliament would follow up on that recommendation remained unanswered. His delegation considered that information concerning such experiments might be useful to the Fifth Committee in its consideration of the introduction of remote interpretation.

30. With reference to the change of name from the Department for General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services to the Department of General Assembly and Conference Management, his delegation wondered whether the change indicated a modification of the mandate of the Department, which was regarded as being responsible for providing conference services and not for conference management. That was a matter that called for clarification by the representatives of the Secretary-General.

31. In conclusion, his delegation emphasized the importance of the implementation of all the mandates given to the Department on a non-selective and non-discriminatory basis; excuses that were put forward based on an alleged lack of financial resources should be examined on a case-by-case basis. The shortage of financial resources should not become an excuse for the Department's failure to address some of its mandates; the resolutions of the General Assembly should all be implemented without distinction.

32. **Ms. Silot Bravo** (Cuba) said that her delegation associated itself with the comments made by the representative of Venezuela on behalf of the Group of 77 and China. The importance of conference services could not be underestimated. The amount of attention devoted to the issue by the General Assembly must be backed up by financial support. The quality of conference services had deteriorated as a direct result of recent budgetary restrictions on the work of the Department. For example, mistakes had begun to appear in publications and translations, the late issuance of documents had caused delays in the work of a number of bodies, and the multilingual character of the Organization had been jeopardized. There was

an urgent need to reinvigorate conference management through enhanced coordination between all the departments concerned and the provision of genuine financial backing.

33. Some of the proposals in the reports under consideration had already been included in the report of the Secretary-General on the strengthening of the United Nations: an agenda for further change (A/57/387), and were already being implemented; it was unclear how the measures proposed in the report on improving the performance of the Department (A/57/289) would relate to them. Referring to paragraph 15 of the latter report, she asked why plenary meetings of the General Assembly and meetings of the Security Council had been singled out for special treatment in terms of meeting schedules and budgetary arrangements. She would also like to know more precisely on what basis the statistics had been compiled concerning interpretation services provided to regional groupings in the biennium 2001-2002, and whether the budgetary restrictions on the Department had curtailed such activities. The proposed abolition of summary records was likely to impair the institutional memory of the Organization and she asked whether such a step was consistent with other decisions taken recently by the General Assembly. Lastly, she failed to understand how attempts to delegate responsibility could be reconciled with the proposed centralization of conference management.

34. **Mr. Niiya** (Japan) said that his delegation shared many of the concerns raised by the representative of Fiji on behalf of the Pacific Islands Forum countries. He emphasized that the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management had a very important role to play in ensuring the full participation of all Member States in the work of the Organization and in promoting partnership among Member States. He trusted that it would spare no effort in the pursuit of those goals.

35. **Mr. Chen** Jian (Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management) noted with satisfaction the degree of support among delegations for the measures set out in the report of the Secretary-General on improving the performance of the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services (A/57/289). Most of those measures were within the purview of the Secretary-General, and the Department had already been requested to commence implementation. Even in those areas, however, the encouragement and guidance of Member States was very useful. There were two proposals that required action by the Committee: the first related to summary records, and the second to the integration of the technical servicing secretariats of the Fifth and Sixth Committees within the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management.

36. Summary records were prepared by précis-writers working on the basis of the languages in which statements were delivered. The completed records were sent for translation into the other official languages of the United Nations. That process implied the use of the valuable resources of the Department's translation services. Owing to the increase in the number of reports and the volume of interparliamentary documentation, those services were already operating at full capacity, and delays had arisen in the translation of summary records, which were often issued long after the meetings to which they related. In the context of its self-assessment exercise, the Department had considered how it could remedy that unsatisfactory situation without adversely affecting Member States and it had been advised that digital recordings might constitute a good replacement for summary records. He emphasized that the Committee was not being asked to take a decision on the matter; rather the Department was seeking authorization to undertake a study of the practical and cost implications of introducing digital recordings as a replacement for summary records. Following the conduct of the study, he would report to the Committee, and it would be for delegations themselves to decide whether to proceed.

37. The integration of all the technical secretariats of the Main Committees within one department, namely, the former Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services, had initially been proposed in the first round of United Nations reforms in 1997. The rationale for that proposal was explained in General Assembly resolution 52/220. Ultimately, it had been decided that the Department would not undertake the technical secretariat servicing of the Fifth and Sixth Committees or of the Security Council, although it had been recognized that the rationalization of servicing arrangements should lead to greater unity of purpose, greater coherence of efforts at all levels and greater cost-effectiveness, which would result in economies of scale. The Secretary-General had been requested to keep the aforementioned arrangements under review and to submit to the General Assembly at its fifty-third

session a report in that regard, with a view to considering the possible integration of all technical secretariat servicing resources for all Main Committees of the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council and their subsidiary and ad hoc bodies and special conferences into the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services. Now that the passage of time had proved the value of integration, the Fifth and Sixth Committee technical servicing secretariats would be transferred to the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management. Since the staff member serving as Secretary of the Sixth Committee had been performing both technical servicing and substantive functions, the technical-servicing secretariat function would have to be separated out for integration into the Department. The exercise would be carried out in such a way as to preserve institutional memory. The Secretary-General had the authority to restructure and regroup the Secretariat, but to the extent that those actions had an impact on the proposed programme budget, the General Assembly, through the Committee, had the right of review.

38. The perennial problem of the late issuance of documentation should be seen against the background of the sheer number of meetings and volume of reports, as described by the Secretary-General in his report on the strengthening of the United Nations: an agenda for further change (A/57/387). The Department was focusing on two aspects of the problem, namely, its own internal procedures, and the mechanisms for consultation and coordination with submitting departments. As a result of efforts to identify the bottlenecks within the Department, editing and referencing had been pinpointed as weak links. The Department intended to strengthen those functions so that translators could work on the basis of edited, referenced documents; that would enhance the quality of translation and avoid the waste of valuable resources.

39. Concerning consultation and coordination with submitting departments, he said that the Department would enhance upstream planning for documentation, inter alia through the proposed slotting system, which was to be launched in early 2003. The aim was to ensure a higher degree of predictability and to improve the availability of documentation. He could not promise that the problem of the late issuance of documentation would disappear altogether, but the Department would do its best to alleviate it.

40. A further document-related issue was the idea of "print-on-demand" hard copies. That was a concept which should not be misunderstood: the aim was not to eliminate the distribution of hard copies of documents, but to eliminate their unnecessary distribution. The Publishing Section would try to identify needs as accurately as possible in order to ensure that the number of hard copies produced did not exceed the demand for them. The Section was also developing tools to enable users to request hard copies on line. Those efforts would help to produce documentation in a more efficient and cost-effective way. The cooperation of users would be needed, and they would be asked to review their documentation requirements at least twice a year.

41. There were no current plans to reduce or limit in-room distribution of hard copies: they would continue to be available to delegations on request, and the on-line request tools would make them immediately available. Permanent missions would be asked on a voluntary basis to use electronic access to documents where that did not cause them inconvenience and they would have access to portable document format (pdf) copies via the Official Documents System (ODS). From the end of November 2002, the electronic version of the *Journal of the United Nations* would contain a hyperlink to the daily list of documents, where further hyperlinks would provide access to all the documents listed. The only requirement for users would be possession of the Acrobat pdf reader, which could be downloaded from the internet at no charge. Representatives of Member States would also have access to unrestricted documents from their private homes. The Publishing Section would identify missions with limited or no information-technology readiness and look into the feasibility of providing such missions with suitable equipment. He stressed once again that there would be no deterioration of service because of a limit on hard copies, and that no delegation would be obliged to obtain documents exclusively by electronic means.

42. The quality of language services was another issue of perennial concern. It was, and would continue to be, a focus of the Department's efforts. The question was one of determining the causes of the less than satisfactory level of interpretation and, in particular, translation. In the case of translation, the translation

services had had to resort to undesirable working methods because of the increasingly late submission of lengthy documents with tight deadlines. Their staffing levels did not keep pace with the volume of work which they received. To meet the deadlines for translation, long documents had to be divided among several translators. If time was particularly short, the document might be divided among self-revisers and revisers and nobody would have an overall view of the entire translated document or have time to review its component parts for consistency. Extensive reliance on overnight processing of documents had only increased the pressure of time and jeopardized quality.

43. Some of the factors which had harmed quality were beyond the control of the Department, however. First, some translation services, particularly the Arabic Translation Service, did not have enough capacity to cope with certain languages. That meant that the text in the original language had first to be translated into a second language, from which a "relay" translation could be produced. That increased the risks of inaccuracies and mistranslations and harmed the quality of the final product. There were problems in finding qualified translators with the desired combinations of languages. Second, the substantial number of retirements had produced an imbalance between more experienced staff and junior staff in some services, as well as high vacancy rates. The earlier freeze on recruitment had caused the loss of a generation of translators who would now have been advancing to the senior ranks of their services. That, in turn, affected the training of newly recruited staff. Third, the reorganization of the grading structure of the translation services in 1981, when the practice of "self-revision" had been introduced, had caused a structural imbalance between translators and revisers and had resulted in a rate of self-revision far above the maximum desirable level of 45 per cent. Fourth, it had become increasingly difficult to recruit and retain high-calibre language staff because of competition from other international and regional organizations. That competition was particularly acute in the case of the official languages of the United Nations which were also official languages of organizations such as the European Union. The United Nations set high standards by requiring translators to have an excellent knowledge of two official languages in addition to their mother tongue, and there was not a large reserve of translators with those skills. Since the countries from which the United Nations had traditionally recruited such staff were placing less and less emphasis on the teaching of foreign languages, the shortage was likely to become more acute, and the United Nations would find itself competing with other organizations for a shrinking pool of linguists. Those conclusions applied equally to the recruitment of permanent staff and the recruitment of the qualified freelance staff who were needed to increase capacity at peak periods. The Department would use its external studies programme to encourage existing staff to learn additional languages and improve their knowledge of subjects dealt with in the Organization. There was a limit to what it could do, however.

44. A number of delegations had asked why it had been decided to abolish the Official Records Editing Section. The Secretary-General had requested every department to undertake a self-analysis to determine which subprogrammes added considerable value to the activities of the Organization, and which added less or marginal value to those activities. The Department had recognized that the Official Records Editing Section had provided a valuable service: it had, inter alia, been responsible for ensuring the concordance of all six language versions of resolutions. However, it had become clear that pressure of time had sometimes led that concordance exercise to be performed after the resolutions had been adopted. That raised two issues. First, if the changes made as a result of the concordance exercise were significant, the Department's desire to improve linguistic quality would in his view lead it to exceed its authority by altering documents which had already been adopted in plenary meeting by the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council or the Security Council. Second, if those changes were not significant, it was likely to be more worthwhile to redeploy valuable human resources to other more urgent tasks such as translation and pre-editing. The Secretary-General had therefore decided to disband the Official Records Editing Section and redeploy those of its staff with the requisite qualifications either to translation or to pre-editing duties. Staff who required it would receive retraining.

45. Linguistic concordance work would continue in order to guarantee quality, but it would take place in the time intervening between the adoption of resolutions by the Main Committees of the General Assembly and the final adoption of texts by the General Assembly. Once again, a prerogative was

being returned to the Member States, which would thus be able to make a final examination of texts submitted to the General Assembly to ensure that the various language versions corresponded to what they had agreed.

46. The issue of global management of conference services had been brought to the attention of the Department in two resolutions: resolution A/56/253, which called on the Secretary-General to ensure that conference services were managed in an integrated manner throughout all duty stations (para. 81), and resolution A/56/242, which requested the Secretary-General to ensure that the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services was considered the appropriate executive authority to oversee, coordinate and enhance the global management and delivery of United Nations conference services, under the legislative authority of the General Assembly and through oversight and examination by the Committee on Conferences (para. II.3)

47. In paragraphs 31 to 40 of his report on improving the performance of the Department (A/57/289), the Secretary-General set out what would be done to comply with the Member States' wish for the integration of global management. The Department had devoted particular attention to two aspects of the issue: budgetary matters and human resources. Since the establishment of the Department, the conference services of Headquarters and of the United Nations Offices at Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi had been integrated into a single section of the programme budget (sect. 2). The rationale had been to achieve economies of scale by pooling finite resources for activities which were similar in nature, and to recognize that cooperation and coordination between duty stations also required financial integration and coherence. As indicated in the report, the Department would enhance monitoring of the use of resources at the various duty stations to ensure that global management became a reality. It was important to point out that the ratio of allotment of resources to each duty station would not be changed. Monitoring of the use of resources would simply be improved in order to ensure that what the Member States had requested was achieved in practice. The same spirit would guide action on the management of human resources. He had promised his colleagues at the other three United Nations Offices that nothing would be done without consulting them. In short, there would be greater centralization at the policy level, but decentralization would be maintained at the operational level.

48. Efforts had been made to improve the situation of the interpretation services at the United Nations Office at Nairobi by filling vacant posts. The status was as follows. Four posts in the Chinese booth had been filled. Three posts in the English booth were filled, one with an interpreter on assignment from the United Nations Office at Geneva who would be replaced soon. Three posts in the French booth were filled, but a fourth interpreter on assignment from the United Nations Office at Geneva would be returning there in January 2003, leaving that booth without coverage for Russian. Three posts in the Russian booth were filled. In the Spanish booth, two associate interpreters had passed the Spanish-language competitive examination, and would shortly be recruited. The third vacancy would be filled from the roster of successful candidates. In the Arabic booth, one trainee interpreter was awaiting training, one was in the process of recruitment and was due to begin work in late October or early November 2002. A third interpreter would be assigned to Nairobi for two years from November 2002, and a further candidate had submitted a curriculum vitae to the Office of Human Resources Management. The Department could therefore be seen to be making sincere efforts to make the team of interpreters in Nairobi fully operational during 2003.

49. With regard to the programming of meetings, he referred the Committee to paragraph 15 of the report on improving the Department's performance (A/57/289), which stated that the Department would comply strictly with the calendar of conferences and meetings approved by the General Assembly. However, it was also returning to the Member States the prerogative of deciding whether and how to accommodate ad hoc requests for additional meetings beyond those already scheduled, using established mechanisms.

50. **The Chairman** welcomed the efforts of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management to serve the Member States better, and the efforts of the Under-Secretary-General to provide comprehensive responses to the questions raised.

51. **Mr. Kramer** (Canada) said that he was encouraged by the direction which the Department was taking, but would like further details on a number of issues. His delegation understood the mandate which

the Member States had given for action to promote global management of conference services, but it wished to know more about the specific tools that would be used to achieve that goal. For example, the Office of Internal Oversight Services had suggested that memorandums of understanding should be concluded between the Department and the Directors-General of the various duty stations and he asked if there were any work planning tools to forecast the availability of personnel and capacity which could be shared throughout the Organization. With regard to translation services, he asked if the Department had considered increasing the pool of potential recruits by reducing its requirements from three languages to two, as one consultants' report had proposed. He also expressed interest in hearing the Under-Secretary-General's views on how best to measure progress in the Department's efforts. His delegation agreed that the workload standards gave a limited insight into productivity. He asked how the Under-Secretary-General would measure productivity and cost-effectiveness, and how it would be possible to develop a better understanding of the progress of improvements over time.

52. **Ms. Silot Bravo** (Cuba) said that the attention which delegations had paid to the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management was a measure of the importance of its work within the Organization. Her delegation supported the view of the representative of Canada that the Department should use specific benchmarks to promote results-based management and to evaluate the complex range of activities which it undertook. Her first specific question related to the reference to programme budget implications in the report on the Department (A/57/289, para. 15) regarding conference services for the Main Committees and other intergovernmental bodies as opposed to services for the Security Council and plenary meetings of the General Assembly. The report spoke of services being provided in strict compliance with the calendar of conferences and meetings, but her delegation wondered how the Secretariat interpreted the consultants' recommendations that there should be a flexible mechanism for programming conference services which did not tie the hands of the Main Committees and other bodies in the performance of their work. Her delegation also wished to point out that the statistics for interpretation services provided for the regional groups in the biennium 2001-2002 showed that the utilization rate of forecast needs had been high. That was out of step with the situation emerging as a result of the budget restrictions that had been imposed. It might be appropriate for the Department to find better ways of collecting statistics on the provision of interpretation services for the regional groups, as there was a contrast between the situation on the ground and the situation resulting from the adoption of resolutions 56/254 D and 56/287.

53. **Mr. Sabbagh** (Syrian Arab Republic) said that his delegation respected the prerogative of the Secretary-General to undertake reform, as the Under-Secretary-General had explained. The Under-Secretary-General had also pointed out that the Fifth Committee could review and revisit the measures taken. However, he would like further details of the mandate given to the administration, in particular, the Department of General Assembly and Conference Management, which was bound by what the Member States decided and was responsible for supplying services for conferences and meetings. He wondered why the Department had altered the details of the programme budget instead of adhering to the terms of General Assembly resolution 54/249. He also asked if the *Repertoire of the Practice of the Security Council* had been translated into all six official languages, as requested in resolution 55/222.

54. **Ms. Udo** (Nigeria) said that her delegation generally supported the Department's reform proposals and shared the views which the representative of Canada had just expressed thereon. It welcomed the efforts being made to fill the vacancies that existed at the United Nations Office at Nairobi and looked forward to a report on the progress that had been achieved. It would also welcome additional information on the proposed integration of the functions of the Fifth and Sixth Committee technical-servicing secretariats into the Department. In that connection, her delegation took note of the request contained in the letter dated 18 October 2002 from the Chairman of the Sixth Committee addressed to the Chairman of the Fifth Committee (A/C.5/57/18) and would welcome clarification of the procedural implications of that request.

55. On the question of information technology support for permanent missions, she wished to know whether, in addition to equipment, missions would also be provided with computer accessories, training, and maintenance services. Lastly, she wished to know the

basis on which the number of hard copies to be printed of a particular document would be determined.

56. **Mr. Farid** (Saudi Arabia) said that his delegation would greatly appreciate it if, during the month of Ramadan, the Committee's afternoon meetings could begin at 2 p.m. and end at 5 p.m. to allow members of the Committee who were Muslims to travel home and break their fast.

57. **Mr. Chen** Jian (Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management), replying to the further questions and comments of members, said that, as a general principle, the Department of General Assembly and Conference Management was guided by the decisions of the intergovernmental bodies and would continue to be so guided. The Department would report on the progress achieved in the implementation of its reforms in order to facilitate review by Member States and to obtain their understanding and support.

58. On the question of coordination between the different duty stations, such coordination was carried out at several levels. First, annual meetings were held between the four duty stations to exchange ideas and best practices and to set policy guidelines for conference services. At a working level, managers were in contact on a weekly or daily basis, as necessary. Such contacts were particularly useful in the case of conferences away from Headquarters, at which the workload was shared among the various duty stations. He himself maintained personal contacts and discussed general policy issues with the executive directors at the other duty stations. It was proposed to strengthen those mechanisms in order to further improve coordination between all duty stations. While the proposed reforms were being implemented only at Headquarters, all duty stations had been involved in the self-appraisal exercise.

59. As for the suggestion that the Department might wish to consider the recruitment to the translation and interpretation services of candidates who had only two languages, the Department still followed its long-standing practice of requiring candidates to be proficient in two other official languages in addition to their mother tongue. It would, however, look into the possibility of changing that requirement as a means of increasing the in-house capacity of language staff.

60. As far as the expected results of the reforms were concerned, the Department expected to see improvements in the documentation and meetings servicing situation, as well as in the overall quality of services provided to Member States. The Department was working together with the in-house consultants provided by the Office of Internal Oversight Services to prepare a comprehensive implementation plan that would include all indicators of achievement in the reform exercise. Standards for measuring the output of the language services should be both quantitative and qualitative. The Department would address that aspect at a later stage.

61. Two organs, the General Assembly and the Security Council, had been exempted from the action taken by the Secretary-General in response to the budgetary constraints. However, the subsidiary organs of those two bodies had not been exempted. The Department would continue to service meetings of regional groups, within the limits of available resources. Lastly, the financial implications of the proposals for integrating the functions of the Fifth and Sixth Committee technical servicing secretariats would be set out in the programme budget proposals for the biennium 2004-2005. He would be pleased to provide more detailed information during the informal consultations.

62. **The Chairman** said that the Bureau would consider the request made by the representative of Saudi Arabia for the Committee's meeting hours to be adjusted during the month of Ramadan and he would report back to the Committee.

Agenda item 110: Financial reports and audited financial statements, and reports of the Board of Auditors (*continued*)

Draft resolution A/C.5/57/L.9

63. *Draft resolution A/C.5/57/L.9 was adopted.*

Agenda item 111: Review of the efficiency of the administrative and financial functioning of the United Nations (*continued*)

Common services (*continued*)

Draft decision A/C.5/57/L.14

64. *Draft decision A/C.5/57/L.14 was adopted.*

Agenda item 111: Review of the efficiency of the administrative and financial functioning of the United Nations (*continued*)

Agenda item 118: Human resources management (*continued*)

Gratis personnel provided by Governments and other entities (*continued*)

Draft resolution A/C.5/57/L.5

65. **Mr. Chaudhry** (Pakistan) introduced draft resolution A/C.5/57/L.5 on behalf of the Chairman.

66. *Draft resolution A/C.5/57/L.5 was adopted.*

Agenda item 112: Programme budget for the biennium 2002-2003 (*continued*)

Construction of additional office facilities at the Economic Commission for Africa in Addis Ababa (*continued*)

Draft decision A/C.5/57/L.8

67. *Draft decision A/C.5/57/L.8 was adopted.*

Videoconferencing at the United Nations (*continued*)

Draft decision A/C.5/57/L.10

68. *Draft decision A/C.5/57/L.10 was adopted.*

Decentralized budgetary and financial arrangements for central services (*continued*)

Draft decision A/C.5/57/L.11

69. *Draft decision A/C.5/57/L.11 was adopted.*

Delivery of advisory services to Member States (*continued*)

Draft decision A/C.5/57/L.12

70. *Draft decision A/C.5/57/L.12 was adopted.*

Trends in extrabudgetary resources at the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean and the impact on its capacity to carry out the programme of work (*continued*)

Draft decision A/C.5/57/L.13

71. *Draft decision A/C.5/57/L.13 was adopted.*

Agenda item 115: Administrative and budgetary coordination of the United Nations with the specialized agencies and the International Atomic Energy Agency (*continued*)

Draft decision A/C.5/57/L.6

72. *Draft decision A/C.5/57/L.6 was adopted.*

Agenda item 119: Joint Inspection Unit (*continued*)

Draft resolution A/C.5/57/L.7

73. **Ms. Wahab** (Indonesia) introduced draft resolution A/C.5/57/L.7 on behalf of the Chairman.

74. **Ms. Udo** (Nigeria) expressed the hope that the views which her delegation and others had expressed during the informal discussions on the item would be taken into account when the Joint Inspection Unit finalized the list of topics for its programme of work for 2003 and beyond.

75. *Draft resolution A/C.5/57/L.7 was adopted.*

Agenda item 122: Report of the Secretary-General on the activities of the Office of Internal Oversight Services (*continued*)

Draft resolution A/C.5/57/L.4

76. **Mr. Kelapile** (Botswana) introduced draft resolution A/C.5/57/L.4 on behalf of the Chairman.

77. *Draft resolution A/C.5/57/L.4 was adopted.*

Organization of work

78. **Mr. Ramos** (Portugal), coordinator of the question of cooperation between headquarters departments and regional commissions under agenda item 112, proposed that the Secretariat should prepare a draft decision on the question, by which the General Assembly would take note of the note of the Secretary-General contained in document A/57/361 and of the related report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions contained in document A/57/7/Add.3.

79. *It was so decided.*

The meeting rose at 12.50 p.m.